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ABSTRACT

The design of a program for teaching audience awareness proceeds in a clear and logical order so that it can be incorporated into any writing syllabus concerned with traditional matters of form. The program begins with a brief questionnaire designed to elicit student problems with and feelings about audience. Class discussion of the questionnaire is followed by an introduction and discussion of the heuristic model for audience awareness. This heuristic model is a series of questions about the intended audience that associates audience characteristics to the writer, the subject, and the form of the composition. The program concludes with three writing projects that gradually expand student knowledge of three representative groups of readers--their class peers, magazine readers, and an initially nebulous audience of their own creation. Each of the writing assignments requires implementing the heuristic for definition of audience, thereby helping students to internalize an awareness and appreciation of audience characteristics. The heuristic model and the instructional program are most helpful to instructors who have avoided discussing audience because of the difficulties involved in teaching what many have considered an intuitive part of the writing process. (RL)

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A HEURISTIC MODEL FOR CREATING A WRITER'S AUDIENCE

by

Joanne F. Petrick and Fred R. Pfister

As teachers of writing, we have virtually ignored an integral part of the composition process: the audience. We have not taught our students how to analyze audience and why content and style must be formed by just such an analysis.

Students can write successful sentences with mature syntactical fluency, have a clear thesis and adequate support for it following a logical mode of development, and still fail with their audiences because they do not have the proper "rhetorical stance." They still fail to produce a successful composition because they have too little or no knowledge of their readers.

Students become angry or discouraged with both the grade and the often not-too-helpful remarks they find scribbled on their papers when they are returned by composition teachers, and we should not blame them in the least. Those students who do write successfully for us often do so because they know us and can write successfully for the audience of one--the teacher. In a real writing situation, those students often do not do nearly as well. The question is: Why have writing instructors neglected to teach audience?

We suspect it is because the knowledge a writer has of his audience is more a mystery, more intuitive, and less teachable and measurable than

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other aspects of the writing process. Handbooks are of little help. Usually they have no more than slightly amplified "Consider your audience."

Writer's Market, the Bible of freelancers, offers even less advice than do most handbooks and composition teachers. Its remarks, made by various magazine editors under individual magazine markets, are comments like "Know your audience!" and "Be sure you read our magazine before you submit a piece."

The problem for writers comes from the fact that their audience is unseen, a phantom. It is always, to use Walter J. Ong's term, "a fiction," a creation of the writer's mind. Students, like all writers, must fictionalize their audience. But they must construct in the imagination an audience that is as nearly a replica as is possible of those many readers who actually exist in the world of reality and who are reading the writer's words.

The question now comes to mind: "How does the composition instructor teach students to construct a plausibly real audience?" In light of the success of the heuristic procedure for discovery of subject matter, we wondered if it were possible to design an effective heuristic that could be taught to students, practically used by them, and eventually internalized so that it would become an integral part of their composition process.

We introduced our students to the heuristic (See Appendix A) gradually in a series of steps or projects. Because we felt that their responses would give us a valuable frame of reference in presenting our heuristic model and subsequent related activities, our first step was to give forty students (a heterogeneous group ranging from honors to remedial stu-

dents) the following questionnaire to discover their existing knowledge and sensitivity to audience.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. When you write a paper, do you think it is important to think about who will read your paper?

   _____yes _____ no _____not sure

2. Do you, in fact, think about your reader/audience when you write a theme?

   _____yes _____no _____sometimes

3. If you responded "no" or "sometimes" to question #2, explain why--or when--you do not consider your reader.

4. If you responded "yes" or "sometimes" to question #2, who do you usually identify as the reader of your papers?

5. If you responded "yes" or sometimes" to question #2, explain what aspects of the reader's identity are important for you to know when you write a theme to him/her.

6. If you responded "yes" or "sometimes" to question #2, what aspects of your own writing do you need to think about to make sure that your reader will appreciate your paper?

7. Do you think that learning about how to analyze your reader would help you to write papers?

   _____yes _____no _____don't know

Of the forty surveyed, twenty-eight admitted to thinking about the identity of the reader; twenty-two of these, however, accepted the teacher as their sole audience; another fifteen designated as their audience "anyone." Thirty students believed it was important to consider the identity of the reader when planning the paper.

The reasons they offered for such consideration were that they expected their readers to "enjoy" and/or "get interested" in their paper. Seven

mentioned that they wanted to think about how well they knew the person for whom they were writing; they felt that they could write more easily if they knew their reader. Five said that they wanted to write to someone who could understand what they had to say, someone who had some background knowledge of their subject. Several were concerned that the reader have "respect" for the writer or that they not offend the readers' feelings. Only three mentioned that style might be shaped by a knowledge of their audience.

Of the ten students who answered that it was not important to consider audience, most admitted that they would write the way they did regardless of who their reader was. They were so worried about getting down on paper what they had to say that they could not be bothered worrying about anyone else's response to their writing. These people typically demonstrate the problem of egocentricity identified by Kroll and Lunsford, among others.[1]

This questionnaire proved to us that the majority of our students do have a general conception of the importance of audience in their writing. But their responses also reveal that they are not all sure why or how to deal with this facet of the composition process. Our responsibility in providing this instruction is thus made apparent.

After sharing these results from the questionnaire with the students, we discussed the significance of audience consideration and what effect that consideration would have on the success of their papers. We then distributed our heuristic model and explained it to the class.

This model is based on two assumptions: that the writing process involves four considerations--the writer, the subject, the reader, and the

form (or style) of the composition--and that the understanding of each component is fundamentally determined by an understanding of its relationship with the other three components. The model makes the student examine these interrelationships from the constant focus of the reader, the audience. The order of its four parts is determined by the relative ease in which the questions in each part can be answered. The first questions provide a foundation of information that the more difficult questions build on.

The first part explores common characteristics of the audience themselves: the environment of the audience. The questions are a comprehensive probe of their basic social, educational, and ethical identities. Not all of these questions are relevant to every writing situation; students quickly learn which ones they need to ask. This identification of the audience, however, is the writer's initial step toward making judgments about stylistic matters such as tone and word choice.

The heuristic's second part examines the relationship between the audience and the subject. It seeks to determine the objective information and the values the readers have about the subject.

Part three defines the relationship of the audience and the writer. The first questions seek information and opinions that might affect his relationship. The third question, "What is my purpose in addressing this audience?" and the fifth question about roles imagined for the writer and the audience are critical because they help the writer to deliberate upon important matters of form: for example, do I want to entertain my readers or persuade them and which rhetorical pattern will best accomplish my purpose? Do I want to be a teacher instructing a learner or a friend chatting with a friend (what tone, words do I choose)? Question four, "Is

this an appropriate audience for this subject?" is certainly a vital issue and can be easily answered at this point because of the data gathered from parts one and two of the heuristic.

The fourth part of the model examines the relationship between audience and form: What are the best methods the writer can use to achieve cooperation/persuasion/identification with the audience? This is obviously the most difficult part to act upon because it presupposes that the students know how to control basic stylistic components: patterns of development, tone, diction, and syntax. Teaching these matters of form takes up a goodly part of the composition instructor's traditional syllabus, but the purpose in teaching them is successful communication--to a reader. When students finally come to a realization that these matters have such a practical purpose, they are more apt to learn them. And the questions studied in the first three parts of the model definitely help students see the significance of making appropriate stylistic choices and give them some initial guidance in doing so, Part four thus naturally capitalizes on the work already accomplished with the heuristic.

After we explained the heuristic model, our next step was to put it into practice. We developed a program of instruction which would gradually enable students to internalize the essential components of the model and which, in so doing, would provide them with a practical tool for expanding and reinforcing their knowledge of the importance of taking account of the audience's role in their writing. We began by meeting them where they were; many students do assume that they write solely to the teacher, often in spite of different instructions the teacher might give. Recognizing this assumption, we first worked at identifying ourselves as

audience--i.e., we answered some of the questions the model presents as openly and honestly as possible.

Since we often ask students to write to their peers in the composition class, we also encouraged the students to share information about themselves with each other in open discussion. Asking them a few leading questions about their majors, their hometowns, their initial reactions to college life, their writing experiences in high school elicited easy responses from most of the class. At the end of this session, the class had a realistic picture of who their teacher and their peers were. And because they had some knowledge of this group, they could begin to feel secure in writing for it.

A practical essay assignment was designed to reinforce this beginning knowledge. Each student was paired with a classmate about whom he/she was asked to write a character sketch, a sketch that would "capture the essence" of his/her partner. We allowed an hour of class time for the couples to question each other--and suggested that they might want to continue their discussion at a subsequent time outside the classroom. The assignment also included a written evaluation by each student of the sketch that his/her partner had written. The critique could address itself to any points the student considered pertinent--factual accuracy, sincerity of tone, etc. This critique essentially provided the partners with an immediate, tangible reaction to their writing from a real audience other than teacher.

Although most students initially approached this assignment with some anxiety, they admitted once they had completed it that the character sketch helped them to write about a subject and that the critique provided non-threatening beneficial insight into their writing style. And, of course,

the whole process allowed them an extended opportunity to become familiar with a representative member of the peer audience.

The next step in our program was to extend our students' study of audience to a group beyond their classmates. In this two-part exercise, students were asked to identify the audience traits of magazine readers. The first time, all students were asked to examine some issue of one particular magazine, one that has a rather specialized, easily identifiable audience--Organic Gardening, Ms., or Blackbelt Magazine, for example. Using questions in the heuristic model as a basis, we discussed the magazine in class. Next, the students were asked to complete a written analysis of the readers of a magazine of their choice. Most students were delighted with the dissection of a magazine, and their insights as they studied the pictures and prose, the ads and articles, were often quite perceptive. As they warmed up to the assignment, their written analyses became even more perceptive than the analysis reached during discussion. Having to do the analyses often forced the student to categorize the audience in a stereotype--a sort of "common man" reader. Often this type was drawn from an admaker's conception of the audience of the publication, and students soon agreed that Madison Avenue knew audiences--hence the effectiveness of most of the advertisements. This examination thus helped to persuade them that successful written communication--be it ad or essay--depends a great deal on the writer's knowledge of his audience.

At this point, we felt that students were comfortable implementing the heuristic, and so our final project was a process analysis paper for which students were instructed to create their own audience. For this theme, they were asked to pick a topic they knew well, one they would enjoy explaining to another person. Using the heuristic model, they first

wrote out a description/definition of their chosen reader. The following excerpts from students' descriptions show how they dealt with the heuristic.

From Amy Bango's theme on "How to Wash a Rabbit":

Audience/Writer

* The reader generally likes me because s/he feels I have excellent taste in cars.
* We share the common experiences of owning our first car.
* We both are concerned with our Rabbit's appearance.
* We both are prejudiced against people who are careless with something we care about.
* I hope to give the reader information before s/he could obtain it through experience. Relate my ideas to her/him.
* My role is that of teacher--hers/his is that of willing student.

From Bruce Altieri's theme on "Restoring Antique Wood Furniture":

Audience/Self

The audience is a person of lower middle class or better. This person is old-enough to acknowledge an antique and to handle certain sharp tools and paint. Preferably he/she is sixteen years or older. His/her education is at least that of an eighth grader. He/she follows instructions well and recognizes antique furniture. He/she does not have to know any uncommon words used in the restoration process. The reader needs only to like old furniture and to be interested in restoration. He/she needs a certain amount of patience and free time plus approximately fifty dollars for materials needed in the restoration process.

The feedback we got from this particular assignment was that preliminary detailed audience analysis with aid of the heuristic helped students to identify their audience with realistic detail; this detailed information made them feel more at ease in writing. It also helped them to organize their material more intelligently and cogently; they knew, for example, how detailed a definition of spelunking they needed to give to neophytes or how sophisticated an explanation of tailoring they could give to experienced seamstresses. Also encouraging, they became more sensitive to the tone of their papers; for example, they recognized a reas-

suring tone was necessary for mothers who must care for children with spina bifida problems or for anxious first-time speech givers. Knowledge of audience thus gave students an insight into improving their style.

Our program for teaching audience awareness in a semester's course thus proceeds in a clear and logical order that can be incorporated into any syllabus concerned with traditional matters of form. It begins with a brief questionnaire designed to elicit students' problems with and feelings about audience. It follows discussion of the questionnaire with a careful introduction and discussion of the heuristic model and then three writing projects which gradually expand students' knowledge of three representative groups of readers--their class peers, magazine readers, and an initially nebulous audience of their own creation; each of the projects depends on implementing the heuristic for definition of audience. Essentially, the model and our instructional program would be most helpful to instructors who have avoided discussing audience because of the difficulties involved in teaching a part of the writing process that has long been considered more intuitive and less describable than other matters.

We cannot offer specific evidence to demonstrate the worth of this heuristic. However, we do maintain that our composition classes at Ohio Dominican College and The School of the Ozarks have found it a useful and usable tool. The majority of our forty students have expressed to us their feelings of increased confidence about how to organize and elaborate on their information, how to direct tone and choose words, even sentence patterns--because they have a ready method for identifying the audience they are addressing.

We can match their enthusiasm because we have seen these improvements

in their papers; most gratifying is the improvement in clarity and economy in recent papers. We do not expect or offer the heuristic as a cure-all for students' writing ailments. We know there is no single elixir to solve the myriad of writing ailments that students have, but the awareness of audience, in our teaching experience, did much toward making weak writers better and good writers stronger.

Of course, not every project is without its flaws and failures. In our case, one student who had an essay assignment for another professor tried to analyze him as audience, and, in the course of her analysis, she realized that his lectures were flavorfully peppered with multi-syllabic words and bibliographic jargon. And so, she cunningly concluded, the way to an A was to do likewise. Accordingly, the first sentence of her essay read: "After the death of Saint John, his Gospels were copulated by the other apostles."

Appendix A

A HEURISTIC MODEL FOR AUDIENCE ANALYSIS IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE

The Environment of the Audience AUDIENCE/SELF	What is his physical, social and economic status? (age, environment, health, ethnic ties, class, income) What is his educational and cultural experience? especially with certain patterns of written discourse? What are his ethical concerns and hierarchy of values? (home, family, job success, religion, money, car, social acceptance) What are his common myths and prejudices?
The Subject Interpreted by the Audience AUDIENCE/SUBJECT	How much does the reader know about what I want to say? What is the opinion of the reader about my subject? How strong is that opinion? How willing is he to act on that opinion? Why does he react the way he does?
The Relationship of the Audience and the Writer AUDIENCE/WRITER	What is the reader's knowledge and attitude about me? What are our shared experiences, attitudes, interests, values, myths, prejudices? What is my purpose(s)/aim(s) in addressing this audience? Is this an appropriate audience for this subject? What is the role I wish to assign to the audience? what role do I want to assume for the audience?
What are the best methods the writer can use to achieve copperation/persuasion/ identification with the audience? AUDIENCE/FORM	What pattern/mode/development is appropriate? What tone? What diction, level of diction? What level of syntactic sophistication?

--Fred Pfister and Joanne Petrick

FOOTNOTES

[1] Barry Kroll, "Cognitive Egocentrism and the Problem of Audience Awareness in Written Discourse," Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (October 1978), 274; Andrea Lunsford, "Aristotelian Rhetoric: Let's Get Back to the Classics," Basic Writing, 5 (Fall/Winter, 1978), 3.